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ABSTRACT

Twenty-six teachers at a suburban school near Terre Haute, Indiana, responded to a survey to determine the activities used to teach writing in their classrooms. The results suggest the following: (1) writing in elementary classes concentrates heavily on "creative" writing and responses to literature, and should be broadened to include expository modes; (2) writing needs to be incorporated more consistently in content areas other than language arts and social studies; (3) teachers need to match more carefully what they teach to students' needs; (4) teachers need to place more value on grammar and mechanics; (5) teacher training should concentrate on what working teachers have found to be useful rather than on what college teachers think will be useful; (6) journals and professional literature must include more practical, useable materials for working teachers; and (7) teachers must read journals and attend conferences with open minds for ideas to invigorate their teaching and share their own ideas through journal articles and conference presentations. (HTH)

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Writing in the Elementary Classroom

Like most parents who are also English teachers, I have observed my son's writing with interest. I watched him learn to construct sentences in the first and second grades;I observed his early attempts to write poetry and stories; I sneaked looks at the responses he wrote to questions about stories he'd read for class.

Also, like most parents who are English teachers, I was sometimes concerned that his writing background was not as strong as it should be. I wondered if he was being challenged; I wondered if he was beginning to perceive writing as punishment; I wondered if he was associating writing with only the language arts curriculum, instead of seeing writing as a universal way of sharing ideas, insights, and experiences. Yet at other times, when he read aloud a particularly good piece of his writing, I was re-assured that his background was what it should be. It sounds familiar doesn't it?

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Then, last spring, my department chairperson surprised me by asking if I would be willing to teach an upper-division writing course for students in the elementary-education curriculum. I was already teaching an advanced course for students in the secondary curriculum--and my high school teaching experience had served me well in that course. But elementary education? What was I to do with this class, when my only connection with the writing of children had been through the work of my ten-year-old son?

As you may have guessed, I agreed to teach the class, and I also began looking for ways to familiarize myself with the ways children's writing is currently being taught. I read journals in the field and poured through related books. And then I decided that the best way to understand what is being done in the elementary classroom was to go the the implementers of elementary writing curriculum: the teachers.

Last spring I prepared a survey/questionnaire to distribute to the elementary teachers of Vigo County--and planned to compile the responses of this sizeable group. But luck--or should I say

the bureaucracy--was not with me. My work has been stalled momentarily (by county guidelines intended to protect over-worked teachers from too much form-filling), preventing me from completing my all-county survey. But I was able to isolate a sample group of teachers--those at my son's school--and I began to get a sense of what is happening in elementary writing instruction.

My sample is very small--only the twenty-six teachers at one school--so my results are not universal. But the results are interesting and, I think, representative.

The faculty at Dixie Bee Elementary School, a 677-student school in the southern suburbs of Terre Haute, is a well-established and well-educated group. The oldest member of the faculty received her B.A. in 1939, and the youngest received hers in 1978; the majority began teaching in the late fifties and early sixties. All but one of the teachers have Master's degrees--and the "odd one out" will finish her degree next year. Two teachers have thirty hours above the Master's. Dixie Bee's

teachers, then, are long-established practitioners, concerned with education. They are, in some respects, a "middle-aged" faculty, but with cut-backs and lay-offs throughout the state, I suspect most faculties are. But, the important questions are: "what are they teaching?" and "how are they teaching it?"

To find out what was going on in their classrooms, I asked the teachers to rank a series of writing activities by how often they were incorporated into their basic elementary curricula; the results were not too surprising:

1. Stories were the most often completed activity
2. Responses to readings
3. Short essay responses
4. Descriptions
5. Personal narratives
6. Short "researched" reports
7. Poetry
8. Book reports
9. Journal, letters, and others

I also asked teachers how often they had their children write:

35 % had their students write something once a day

15 % had their students write three times a week

18 % had students write twice a week

33 % had students write once a week

No teachers had their students write less than once a week

Then I asked teachers to comment on what parts of their curricula required the most writing. Again, the results are typical:

100 % use writing in the language arts

80 % use writing in social studies, though clearly not as much or as often

50 % use writing in science, though even less than in social studies

50 % use writing in health, but not very much

None use writing in work related to math, art, or music

The responses to these three questions suggest several things:

1. Teachers use a variety of activities, providing a balance between "creative" and fact-based writing. The primary emphasis is on creative writing and writing related to literature, however, rather than writing which depends on students' own experiences or factual secondary sources. This suggests, to me at least, that the focus of the writing is often loose, unrestricted. That presents problems in the long-range curriculum, but I will address this issue somewhat later.

2. Teachers have their students write frequently. The logistics of evaluation and grading that much work is a problem which I did not address, but students are composing often. And that's good.

3. Writing is often restricted to "traditional" subject areas--language arts and social studies--presenting an unnecessarily confined view of when writing can be useful. That, too, I will discuss later.

Then I asked teachers to identify what they perceived to be their students' favorite writing activities. The results were interesting:

1st--Stories (identified by 80 %)

2nd--Poems (identified by 15 %)

3rd--A dispersement among these others:

Narratives

Letters

Book reports

Responses to reading

Researched reports

Holiday greetings (?)

Essay question responses

When I asked teachers what they saw as the most valuable writing activities for children, these were their responses:

1st--Stories (30 %)

2nd--Narratives (10 %)

3rd--Research reports (10 %)

4th--A scattering of the others

These findings are provocative, at least to some extent.

1) Stories lead the lists--both for children and teachers--and the earlier list on what is being taught. No surprises.

BUT 2) Poems, which children seem to like, are not valued highly by most teachers--further reflected by its 7th ranking on the list of what's being taught.

3) Narrative, which teachers value second (though the group is small), ranks only third with kids--and 5th on the list of what's being taught.

4) Researched reports, also valued by teachers, apparently don't appeal strongly to children, and rank 6th on the list of what's taught.

The disparity here, in all but story writing, suggests that what teachers think is important--at least in the abstract--is not always what they choose to teach. That is a real problem which

needs to be addressed.

When I asked how important grammatical concerns were in student writing, the teachers provided these responses:

Very important--11 %

Fairly important--30 %

Of limited importance--28 %

Of very little importance--31 %

Several teachers commented in the margins of the questionnaires that their concern with grammar and mechanics varied depending on the kind of writing which was done--stressing mechanics with fact-based writing and ignoring it with "creative" writing. Although that at first seems reassuring, with the high percentage of "creative" writing--noted earlier--it seems that grammar and mechanics are not often stressed. Is it any wonder then that students feel somehow cheated when a teacher, sooner or later, expects control of grammar--and penalizes non-standard work?

To find out how teacher training and professional

involvement have influenced their teaching of writing, I asked teachers to respond to four questions.

When asked what kind of writing training they had had and when asked how valuable the work had been, the teachers supplied these answers:

97 % had written lesson plans while in college--but only 35 % of those said such work had been useful when they were teaching.

35 % had prepared unit plans--and 100 % of those said that the work had been helpful.

33 % had done some work in evaluation and paper grading--and 85 % of those said the experience was valuable.

78 % had done some lab teaching at local schools, working directly with children--but only 50 % of those found the experience helpful later on.

Most teachers had been encouraged to read professional

journals and magazines when they were in college, and 80 % still subscribed to or regularly read journals. The clear favorites were:

School Days

Instructor

Other journals were read but were clearly less popular:

Educational Digest

Language Arts

Today's Education

Learning

Teacher

Surprisingly, however, when asked how many teaching ideas they had gleaned from their reading--

None said "very many"

20 % said "many"

80 % said "few"

I also asked them how many conferences they attended each

year:

27 % attended two conferences a year

73 % attended one conference a year

When asked how many ideas they had gotten to help improve their teaching--

No one said "very many"

One person said "many"

70 % said "few"

20 % said "none"

Some chose not to respond.

It is difficult to say why these teachers get so little from the articles they read and the few conferences they attend, but the suggestion is either articles and conferences provide little of real substance which can be usefully incorporated into day-to-day teaching, or these teachers are so entrenched that very little interests them.

Although my current sample is small--and I am looking forward to compiling information from a larger group--the results of this survey suggest some areas for concern in writing in the elementary classroom.

First, writing in elementary classes concentrates heavily on "creative" writing and responses to literature. That, to me at least, suggests a too narrow view of what writing experiences children need. The predeliction of English teachers in college has probably helped determine this emphasis--since teachers, for the most part, have always taught what they themselves have learned in school. But students, even at an early age, need to be familiar with other writing too--writing which will have more direct application in later schooling.

Second, writing needs to be incorporated more consistently in study areas other than language arts and social studies. More use of science reports, more descriptions of art

projects, more writing about music, P.E., or even field trips would be helpful. Then more students would sense that writing is a strategy for communication--not just an activity related to only a few subjects.

Third, teachers need to more carefully match what they teach to what students need. Relying too heavily on "set" writing activities--even when they see more value in others--seems to miss the point of establishing objectives.

Fourth, teachers need to value grammar and mechanics more highly--not necessarily on first drafts of stories or reports, but certainly on final copies--not necessarily on all assignments, but certainly on more than this survey suggests. For if students do not begin to sense at an early age that the way they write something is as important as what they write about, then we will continue to be plagued with student writers unable to produce good, polished pieces of writing.

Fifth, teacher training needs to be improved, so it concentrates on what working teachers have found to be useful rather than on what college teachers think will be useful. This is a tough task because colleges are so often isolated from the schools, but it should be attempted.

Sixth, journals, somewhere, sometime, must include practical, useable materials for working teachers--not just theories for theorists--and conferences must begin to address the concerns of teachers--not just administrators and curriculum planners.

Seventh, teachers must read journals and attend conferences with open minds--looking and listening for ideas to invigorate their teaching. Or, perhaps, teachers should contribute to the field at large by writing articles describing their work or by sharing their ideas in

conference presentations.

Writing in the elementary classroom is crucial for the training of our students and for the well-being of the larger educational system. To use a cliché which is true nonetheless, writing in the elementary classroom is the foundation upon which later writing skills develop. Those of us involved with teaching future teachers and the teachers themselves must make sure that the foundation is broad and that it is solid.